Mercy for the World

"*We sent thee not save as a mercy for the peoples.*"[1]

I have just recited before you a verse from *Surah Anbiya* of the holy Quran. In it God addresses the holy Prophet to tell him that he had been sent as a mercy for the whole world and all the peoples that might be born on this planet. This was, indeed, a unique declaration, or, if I could say so, a revolutionary proclamation for the entire humanity. And, this was put about by God in a Scripture which was destined to be read, after its revelation, in every age, time and clime, by billions of men in every nook and corner of the world. It was to have an unending line of exegetes, commentators and researchers who were to scan every word of it, evaluate its revelations and scrutinise the truth of its contents in the light of past and coming events. Whenever a man makes any statement or a writer comes out with a report in an article to be published in some newspaper or a journal, he has to think a hundred times lest he should be controverted by somebody. If he happens to make any unusual claim, he is extra-cautious for the fear that he might be challenged by another person or proved to be a fibster. As everyone of us knows, books last longer than the journals; they continue to be read for years together and some even live for hundreds of years. Thus, anyone putting forth an annunciation in a book has to be

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1. XXI : 107

over-cautious; he has to make sure that the reaction of his readers is not adverse and that his claim is accepted. Now, you see, the Knower of all secrets has made this declaration in a book about which He Himself says:

> "Falsehood cannot come at it from before it or behind it. (It is) a revelation from the Wise, the Owner of Praise."[1]

His edict about this book runs:

> "Lo! We, even We, reveal the Reminder, and Lo! We verily are its Guardian."[2]

Since these declarations cover both time and space, they cannot be taken lightly.

The announcement made by God covers all the ages and the whole of human race that would make its debut in this world after the prophethood of Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) was announced: it encompasses all the periods of history, past and present, that this world may see after the blessed Prophet was raised as the harbinger of peace for all peoples.

This pronouncement does not exclude any corner of the world from its ambit. God did not proclaim Muhammad as a mercy for Arabia, for the East or for the continent of Asia alone. He has made an unequivocal declaration that His Prophet Muhammad is to be the peace unto the whole world till the end of time.

This unique proclamation was, in truth and reality, so marvellously wonderful, so extensive in its scope and so far-reaching in its effect, and so majestic in issuing the Divine

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1. XLI : 42
2. XV : 9

command that all the philosophers, thinkers, writers, schoolmen or rather every man should have rubbed his eyes in amazement. Of a fact, it would have not at all been surprising if every man of learning had applied himself to explore the veracity of this unprecedented statement. You can scan the history of the world but you would not find such a lucid and clear-cut declaration, so confidently made in such an unconditional language, either in the historical records of the world religions or in the annals of reformatory and revolutionary movements; nay, not even in the histories of the nations and countries and civilisations, nor yet in the entire literature of the human race.

Judaism is one of the oldest world religions. Yet, the concept of God, the Lord of the entire universe and all the nations, is at best a notion of the Lord of Israel according to Judaism. The concept of a Lord of the worlds is not to be found in most of the Old Testament books nor is it present in the hagiographical literature of the Hebrews. It would be futile to search for an announcement declaring anybody as the mercy for all nations in the biographies of the great Hebrew Prophets like Moses and Aaron, or, their Kings, such as, David and Solomon. Judaism had never been a world religion in the sense that it had never endeavoured to spread the glad tidings of Divine mercy and blessings to the whole of humanity without any distinction of blood and race. It actually never did encourage the conversion of non-Jewish people to Judaism.[1]

Christianity is rightly noted for its evangelism and

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1. For details 'see Islam versus Ahl Kitab, Past and Present' by Maryam Jameelah (formerly Margaret Marcus).

preaching the message of love and compassion to the whole of human race but we find Jesus Christ telling his disciples: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."[1] Nobody has ever upheld the distinctions of blood and race in the healing of the sick but when Jesus Christ was asked to restore an afflicted child to health, his reply was; "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs."[2] When Jesus Christ sent forth his disciples to preach the Gospel he instructed them thus: "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter not ye: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."[3]

The attitude of other eastern religions like Hinduism is not different from that of Judaism or Christianity. As a matter of fact, we find it glorifying class distinctions and upholding a heartless caste system forbidding social intercourse between different sections of its own followers. In ancient India the untouchables were deprived of their human rights; they could neither acquire knowledge nor teach others, nor could they apply themselves to the noble pursuit of elevating themselves spiritually. Teaching of the *Vedas* and performance of the sacred rites before the deities, on their own behalf and on behalf of others, was a privilege enjoyed by the Brahmins alone.[4] Vedas could be learnt only by the Kshtrias and Vaishas besides the Brahmins.[5] The Sudras had but one duty, according to Manu, and that

1. Mt: 15:24
2. Mt: 15: 15-16
3. Mt: 10: 5-6
4. Manu Shastra, Chap. 1, p. 88
5. Ibid, pp. 88-89

was to serve the three higher castes.[1] The people of the ancient India had hardly any concept of the world beyond the Himalayas nor were they interested in the peoples and countries living outside India. It would be a labour in vain to make a search for any declaration of universal character in respect of any reformer, *Rishi* or a prophet, whose appearance in India cannot be ruled out according to the teachings of the Quran. For there was absolutely no concept of a Lord of the whole universe in the ancient India, it would rather be illogical to expect any man of God having been recognised as a mercy for all the nations of the world.

We normally determine the worth and merit, significance and greatness of a thing by its quantity and quality. The first denotes the property of the thing to be judged by some sort of measure while the other reflects its spirit or excellence. The Writ of God revealed in the Quran about the holy Prophet of Islam covers both these aspects. The benefits and blessings this world has had through his prophethood and his teachings, and the lease of new life it got through him are not only manifold in number and excellent in character but also unique and unprecedented in the annals of the world. Mercy is a word commonly used by us for every act of compassion or kindness shown by one man to another, but it has various degrees determining the *inter-se* value and merit of different merciful acts. It is mercy if a traveller is told about the way he should go or is given some water to quench his thirst. If a man fans another fellow during the hot season, it is mercy ; likewise,

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1. Manu Shastra, Chap. 1, p. 89

the affection of a father towards his son and the arrangements made by a man for the education of his ward, teaching of the students by a pedagogue, feeding of the poor and hungry and clothing of the naked are all different aspects of mercy. They all flow from the same noble desire to be compassionate and benevolent to others and each one of these acts deserves to be gratefully acknowledged by the beneficiary.

But, of all these manifestations of mercy, the greatest in merit would be the saving of a human life. Imagine a child on his death-bed, his unfortunate mother wailing and weeping for him and his helpless father running to the physicians who seem to have lost all hope of the child's recovery. Suddenly, a doctor arrives as an angel of mercy. He comforts the parents with his kind words and administers medicine to the ailing child who slowly regains his health and strength. This man would undoubtedly be revered as a God-send benefactor of the child and his parents. All other types of merciful acts I have enumerated earlier would fade into insignificance before this act of supreme mercy. This doctor would be hailed as a saviour not by the parents of the child alone, but by his whole family who would ever remember him as a benefactor. Take another example. A blind man is going on a path which has a deep ditch a few steps ahead. The blind man is sure to fall into it and lose his life in a couple of seconds. Now, a man rushes up to catch hold of this poor blind man by his waist and thus saves his life. Or, suppose, there is a boy, the only child of his parents, being carried away by the swift current of a river. The boy is about to be submerged for ever but a courageous young man saves

him by putting his own life at stake. The parents of this boy, nay, all those who have held him dear, would express their heartfelt gratitude to the brave man and remember his kindness throughout their lives.

There is, however, a still higher degree of mercy, and it consists of the saving of entire humanity from death and destruction. But, even the destruction of humanity can be of varying degrees. It may be a temporary debacle or total annihilation. The benevolence of the prophets of God is infinitely superior to the altruism of other human beings inasmuch as the former leave indelible imprints of their mercy on their fellow beings. Time, whose tooth gnaws away everything else, is like turbulent waves of the surging ocean which wipes out not only individuals but nations also. Many a nation, country and civilisation lies buried beneath its dark waters. It treacherous waves are ever intent to devour an erring people and, therefore, the question that has ever vexed the minds of human beings is how to cross this roaring sea to reach the shore of safety. Thus, anybody who could safely pilot the sinking ship of humanity would, unquestionably, be the true benefactor of humanity. The entire progeny of Adam is, in very truth, indebted to those savants and servants of humanity who have bequeathed to it the treasures of knowledge and learning and made its life easier and richer. But, at a time when the life itself is in danger, only that man can be called a true saviour, who saves the life of human beings from the cruel jaws of death and complete annihilation.

What really was this circling wave of death and destruction threatening the existence of man ? It was, as it has ever been, the ignorance of the Lord and Master of the

world, of His nature and attributes, raising of the partakers of divinity with God, forgetfulness of man's obligations to his Creator, failings of human desire and betaking the path of wickedness and iniquity. For this is the time when man insists on his rights but forgets his obligations to others, closes his eyes towards the dignity of his fellow beings and begins to behave like a monster who is at perfect liberty to devour those who are weaker than him. When man forgets these fundamental facts, the prop which supports the structure of human life on earth, he becomes a wolf, a scorpion, and a snake. Then one does not need panthers and lions for man excels every wild beast in ferocity, cruelty. He becomes a devil, the supreme spirit of evil, the enemy of God and man, a Satan incarnate in the human form. Then his fellow beings are consumed by the fire ignited by their own species. No outside agency is then needed for the extirpation of man from the face of the earth.

Such are the times when the infinite mercy of God is set afoot to succour suffering humanity from the evil of his own doings. For in such times of strain and stress only the teachers of humanity sent by God can rescue man from the destruction wrought by his own hands. Humanity is once more brought back to the path of virtue and goodness through the efforts of these guides of mankind. The world then again becomes a place to live for and die for.

Before I tell you about the supreme benevolence of the prophets of God and the extensive scope of the task allotted to them, I would like to put before you a parable which alludes to the nature and significance of the prophets' work. Once a few students on a pleasure trip were

enjoying boating in a river with an illiterate old oarsman. The boys, in a jovial mood, thought of making merry with the poor old man, and one of them came out with the question : "Uncle, have you received some education too ?"

"No, I have not read anything," replied the boatman. "Plying of boats has been my ancestral profession and this is the only art I know to earn a living for my family."

Another boy promptly rejoined, "But you must have learnt some grammar or read a bit of literature, my dear?"

"It is for the first time," replied the boatman, "that I have heard of these things."

"But," insisted the third boy, "you must be knowing something of geometry for it is essential for propelling boats in a correct manner. Surely, you can't do without it ?"

The boys continued to make fun of the poor man by asking about each branch of arts and sciences they had been studying at their college. Ultimately, they asked about the age of the boatman who informed them that he had crossed his fortieth year. The boys lost no time in giving their verdict : "Alas ! you have wasted half of your precious life-time for nothing."

The old man had no explanation to offer, but, perhaps, Providence intended to teach a lesson to these young chaps. The cool and clear water of the river had been flowing calmly so long but suddenly a violent wind arose, as if from nowhere, causing a stir in the river. The surging waves now threatened the safety of the boat which, it seemed, would capsize in a few minutes. All the boys

were scared to death, and it was now the turn of the boatman to pose a question to the boys about their knowledge and learning.

"Boys," addressed the boatman inviting their attention, "have you also learnt swimming."

Terror stricken, all the boys replied in a chorus, "No, we have not learnt it."

"Well", retorted the old man, "I had wasted only half of my life-time, but you have lost the whole of it. If this boat capsizes, all the sciences you have been talking about would go down to the bottom of the river with you. Would that you had learnt swimming also which would have saved your life as well your knowledge."

The record of human life on this earth tells us that whenever the ship of humanity has capsized owing to man's own failings, hardly anything was left to be salvaged. All the treasures of arts and learning, palatial buildings and developmental works, philosophy and literature, in short, all that had been produced by labour of man over thousands of years was lost with the debacle of an erring people. We also know that no civilisation has ever been destroyed because of the lack of poetic genius of its people, or the poor standard of literature it had produced, nor yet did it go down owing to inadequate number of its educational institutions, low standards of living or lack of capital for its trade and industry. The one cause of its collapse was that man himself wanted to commit suicide. You may believe it or not, but the history of bygone civilisations tells us that there had been many an occasion when man had directed his efforts to destructive pursuits with such a zest and enthusiasm as if he were performing

a constructive task beneficial to humanity. At times he had joyfully insisted on going to the gallows as if he were tired of life and its extinction was a great blessing to be sought for at all costs.

The world was passing through a state of hysterics at the close of the sixth century of the Christian era. The entire human race had, it seems, taken a pledge to commit suicide. God has portrayed, in the Quran, the condition then obtaining in the world so graphically that no artist can draw such a true-to-life picture of the then situation.

> "And remember Allah's favour unto you : how ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace; and (how) ye were upon the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it."[1]

If our historians and litterateurs have not been able to preserve the heart-rending account of the pagan past, they need not be blamed for it because limitations of human language and forms of expression would not have allowed them to capture in words the dreadful situation of the then world. The shape of things was so horrible, so critical that not the best word painter could have succeeded in its faithful depiction. How could have any historian drawn a picture of that horrible situation? Did the age of Ignorance mean merely moral corruption of the Arabs and a few other nations? Did it pose the problem of idolatry, depravity or decadence or else self-indulgence, inequity and exploitation of the poor or criminal behaviour of the then stronger nations? Was it simply the question of the burial of

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1. III : 103

innocent new-born daughters by their heartless fathers? It was all this and much more. It was as though the mother earth wanted to swallow its entire progeny. I have no words to describe the terrifying conditions through which the whole world was passing in those days. Only those can understand it who had themselves lived in that horrible age.

It was thus not a problem confronting any single nation or country but the destiny of the whole human race was at stake. If any artist capable of converting a vision into eternity were to paint the portrait of a good-looking young man in a fine fettle, a soul shining through its crystal covering, and could somehow show him to be the vicegerent of God on earth who was ready to take a leap in the abyss of fire, then he would perhaps succeed in portraying the situation thus depicted in the Quran : "(How) ye were upon the brink of an abyss of fire, He did save you from it." The holy Prophet has also illustrated this critical situation through a simile. He says: "The mission and guidance I have been vouchsafed to deliver to this world is like this: A man made a bonfire and when it illuminated the surroundings, insects began to jump over it. You also want to take a leap into the fire in a like manner but I am holding you by your waists to save you from falling into the enternal fire."[1]

The whole problem was how to lead the caravan of humanity to its safe destination. All the social and developmental endeavours, educational and literary efforts were possible only after man had been brought back to a normal, sensible frame of mind. There is the least doubt that the

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1. Mishkat, Bukhari

greatest good the prophets have done to the humanity consists of saving it from the unknown, imminent dangers threatening to destroy it for ever. No literature or philosophy, reformatory or constructive effort, not even the survival of man on this planet could have been possible without the merciful endeavours of the prophets of God. But, so ungrateful is man that he has announced with the flourish of trumpets, time and again, that the prophets of God had had their time, and that the world no longer needed them. Its seers and guides have repeatedly declared that the prophets had nothing new to offer, no benefits to confer on humanity. Man has, in this way, really deposed over and over again against his own existence in this world.

When any civilisation becomes over-sophisticated it closes its eyes to the ethical precepts. Man forgets everything save the satisfaction of his desires and replaces his loving, merciful heart by a selfish and ferocious disposition. His covetous greed takes the shape of an aching void which can never be filled in. This is the time when man becomes mad after the world and all that it stands for and, then, Providence moves to chasten him and give him his deserts. Poet of the East has given expression to the same truth in one of his verses:

Fever of lunacy then overtakes the kings,
Ferule of God are all, Timur and Chinghez.

You can replace the words 'kings' and 'kingship' by civilisation for the insanity of civilisation is nowadays much more dangerous and wider in scope than the madness of the kings of old. A single lunatic can made a hell of the life of all the people around him but, one can very well

imagine, what would happen if the whole people were to lose their heads.

During the era we speak of as the Age of Ignorance the entire human race had become so depraved, so cruel-hearted that it took pleasure in the suffering of man. This is not poetry but supported by hard facts of history: man had turned a demon who was most enthusiastic to witness the death and suffering of his own species. He prized the spectacle of the pangs of death suffered by human beings more than the pleasure he derived from merry-making, eating and drinking.

Gladiatorial sports involving combats between men and wild beasts under the Romans displayed more vividly than any other crime against humanity, the abyss for human nature to sink. But this was not an enormity that had captured the imagination of a few guilty conscience. Writing about the immense popularity of these shows Lecky says in his *History of European Morals* that 'the magnificent circus, the gorgeous dresses of the assembled Court, the contagion of a passionate enthusiasm thrilling almost visibly through the mighty throng, the breathless silence of expectation, the wild cheers bursting simultaneously from eighty thousand tongues, and echoing to the farthest outskirts of the city, the rapid alternation of the fray, the deeds of splendid courage that were manifested were all fitted to entrance the imagination.'[1] The interest and enthusiasm that attended these games of inconceivable atrocity was so intense that special laws were found necessary, and sometimes insufficient, to check them.

1. W. E. H. Lecky : History of European Morals, Vol. I, p. 119.

Thus, the beast in man had taken hold of him during the Age Of Ignorance. He had, by his deeds, furnished the proof that he had forfeited the right to live in this world, or, rather, he had himself lost every desire to remain in this world any more. Yet, his Lord and Master, the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful had decided otherwise. He wanted to save the world and the progeny of Adam from death and destruction through a Messenger who was told that:

> "And (O Muhammad) We sent thee not save as a mercy for the peoples."

It is plain as day that the entire duration of the world's existence since the debut of the holy Prophet of Islam stems from his merciful deeds. First of all he removed the Sword of Damocles hanging over the head of humanity by giving it a new ideal to live for and a new zest and confidence to work for it. A new age of culture and civilization, arts and learning, material and spiritual progress—a new brave world—came into existence through his efforts.

The first and foremost service that he rendered to the humanity consisted of the faith in the Oneness of God. No other creed more revolutionary, more life-giving and more profitable could have been vouchsafed to the humanity. Man had been proud and presumptuous, boastful of his creations like philosophy and poetry and the art of government; he took pride in enslaving other countries and nations; often arrogated himself even to the position of God; but he also demeaned himself by bowing his head before inanimate, lifeless objects, things of his own creation and the mountains, rivers, trees and animals; and harboured

credulous beliefs and irrational fear of the demons and devils. He spent his life in the fear of the unknown and the hope from non-existent powers which could not but foster mental confusion, cowardice, doubtfulness and indecision in him. The Prophet of Islam made him self-reliant, courageous, rational and undoubting by removing the fear of everything else save that of his real Master and the Lord. It was because of him that man came to recognise his Creator as the Supreme Power, the Enricher and Destroyer. This new discovery meant a world of change for him as he cut himself adrift from all superstitious beliefs, irrational fears, dubiousness and misgivings. He could now see the unity of cause in the manifoldness of phenomena, was reassured of his pivotal position in the scheme of creation, became aware of his worth and dignity, in short, his acceptance of the serfdom of the One and only God made him the master of every other created being and object. It was, thus, for the first time that man became aware of the exalted position alloted to him by God.

Unity of Godhead came to be recognised, thank to the last Prophet, as the guiding principle for all schools of thought, philosophies and creeds. Even polytheistic religions were so powerfully influenced by it that their votaries began to fight shy of their creeds and started putting up constructions to explain away their rites and observances demanding devotion to gods and demi-gods. The heathen belief in the worship of numerous deities began to suffer from a sense of inferiority from which it has still not recovered. This was the greatest gift bestowed on humanity by the holy Prophet.

The second great favour conferred by the Messenger of

God on human beings was the concept of equality and brotherhood of mankind. The world before him was divided by manifold divisions of castes and creeds, tribes and nations, some claiming ranks of nobility for themselves and condemning others to the position of serfs and chattels. It was for the first time that the world heard the revolutionary message of human equality from the Prophet of Islam.

> "O Mankind, Your God is one and you have but one father. You are all progeny of Adam, and Adam was made of clay. Lo ! the noblest among you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct. No Arab has any preference over a non-Arab save by his piety."[1]

The Prophet made this declaration on the occasion of his last Haj before a congregation of one lakh and twenty-four thousand persons. His announcement put the seal on the twin principles of the Unity of God and the Unity of mankind. These are the two natural foundations for raising any edifice of peace and progress, friendship and cooperation between different peoples and nations. They create a twin relationship between human beings—that of One Lord and one father for all of them. Oneness of God is the spiritual principle of human equality just as common lineage of the high and the low, the white and the coloured places them on the same plane of humanity.

The world was not in a frame of mind to give ears to the message of equality of human beings when it was first announced by the Prophet of Islam. It was then a radical call, making a clean sweep of the then social relationships and economic and political orders. So striking and revolu-

1. Kinz-ul-Ummal

tionary was this call that it had sent the world into jitters. Today we find the principle of human equality enshrined in the constitutions of different countries and being proclaimed from the forum of the United Nations Organisation in the shape of the Charter of Human Rights but it was all due to the pioneering efforts of the followers of Muhammad, Muslim missionaries and reformers, who made indefatigable efforts to establish a truly egalitarian Muslim society. It was this model established through their toil and tears that later on came to be accepted as the standard for human existence in this world. There was a time when numerous clans and families claimed their descent from the sun or moon. Quran quotes the belief then held by the Jews and the Christians in these words: "The Jews and the Christians say: We are the children of God and those whom He loves."[1] The Pharaohs of Egypt claimed themselves to be the incarnation of Sun-god while India had several ruling families which arrogated themselves as the progeny of sun and moon. The Emperors of Iran called themselves *Kesra* or Chosroes which meant that Divine blood flowed in their veins. The last Iranian Emperor was known as Yazdgard chiefly owing to the Divine respects paid to him by his subjects.

The Chinese rulers deemed themselves to be the sons of Heaven. They believed that the Heaven was their god, who, with his spouse, the goddess earth, has given birth to the human beings and P'au Ku, the Chinese Emperor, was the first-born son of Heaven enjoying supernatural powers. The Arabs were so proud of their language that

1. V : 18

every other nation besides their own was an *Ajami* or dumb to them. Likewise, the Quraish of Mecca being extremely conscious of maintaining their superiority, claimed a position of privilege even in the performance of Haj. This was the shape of things, all over the world, when the Quran heralded that all human beings were equal.

> "O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware."[1]

In another *surah*, which is the opening chapter of the Quran, it was declared that—

> "Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds."[2]

The third great gift and a boon to the humanity bestowed by the Prophet of Islam is the Islamic concept of human dignity. During the Age of Darkness when Islam made its appearance none was so ignoble and humiliated as man. Without any worth, he had absolutely no sense of human dignity. Oftentimes trees and animals regarded as sacred owing to religious beliefs or traditions, enjoyed a more coveted place than man himself. Human sacrifices at the altar of deities were a common spectacle. It was solely due to Muhammad, the Prophet, that man came to appreciate the fact that human beings, the glorious creation of God, were entitled to much more loving regard, respect and honour than any other creature. The rank holy Prophet accorded to man was next only to God, for God

1. XLIX : 13
2. I : 1

had Himself heralded the purpose of man's creation in these words of lasting beauty—

> "He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth."[1]

Man was declared as the best of creations, the ruler of the world and all that exists in it.

> "Verily We have honoured the children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good thing for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom We created with a marked preferment."[2]

Man had been accustomed to associate nobility with those who claimed themselves to be the progeny of gods and demi-gods. In order that the honour of the common man was not usurped again by the selected few, the prophet announced :

> "The whole of mankind is the family of God and he amongst His family is dearest to Him, who does good to others."[3]

A celestial Tradition of the Prophet alludes to the deep concern of God for the welfare of human beings. It says : "God would ask (someone) on the Day of Judgement, "I was ill but you did not pay a visit to Me." The man would reply ; "How could have I paid a visit to Thee. Thou art the Lord of the worlds." But God would say, "Do you not recollect that one of My slaves was ill. Had you gone to see him, you would have found Me by his

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1. II : 29
2. XVII : 70
3. Mishkat

side." Then God would again ask, "O Son of Adam, I asked you to feed Me, but you refused it to Me." The man would submit, "How could have I fed Thee, Thou art the Lord of the Worlds". But the reply of God would be: "Do you not remember that one of My slaves had asked you for food. Didn't you know that if you had given him food, you would have found it with Me!" God would again ask, "O son of Adam, I asked you water to drink but you refused it to Me." The man would say in reply, "O Lord, How could have I given water to Thee. Thou art the Lord of the worlds." But the reply given by God would be: "Do you not recollect that one of My slaves asked you for water, but you refused. Did you not know that if you had given him water, you would have found it with Me."[1]

Islam preaches unalloyed and absolute unity of God and rejects every form of anthropomorphism. Still, it employs this similitude to drive home the rank and dignity of man in the eyes of God. Has any other religion or philosophical thought accorded a nobler place to human beings than Islam ?

The Prophet of Islam taught that the surest way to attract blessings of God was to be kind and considerate to others.

> "The Most Compassionate (God) is kind on those who are kind to others. If you would show kindness to those who live on the earth, He who lives in the Heaven, shall shower His blessings on you."[2]

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1. Sahih Muslim
2. Abu Da'ud

You can very well imagine the pitiable condition of man in the days when this powerful voice of human dignity had not been raised in the world. A mere whim of a king or emperor could then cost the life of a thousand men. It was then not unusual for an ambitious adventurer to put to sword the entire population of a conquered land. Alexander converted all the countries from Greece to India into a vast battlefield. Caeser played with the lives of human beings as if they were wild beasts. The two World Wars fought only recently had cost the lives of millions merely for securing markets for the industrial produce of advanced nations or to establish national or political ascendancy of certain nations over all others. Iqbal has correctly assessed the political ambitions of man in this verse.

Man is still possessed by the imperialistic lust,
What a pity ! Man prowling after man as yet.

At the time when Muhammad was invested with the mantle of prophethood, a general sense of pessimism springing from the worthlessness of human nature and hopelessness of Divine succour filled the air. The ancient religions of the East and the mutilated Christianity, specially in the West, had an equal share in producing that mental climate. The philosophy of re-birth, preached by the religions of ancient India, which assigned no place to the will and decision of man, meant that the present life was but a form of retribution for one's actions during his previous life with which the Christian doctrine of Original Sin and Atonement had joined hands to shake the confidence of millions, all over the world, in the respondence and amenability of human actions. Mankind had lost faith

in the mercy of God whose eternal and immutable decree seemed to have condemned man to a pre-determined destiny without reference to his evil or virtuous behaviour. But Muhammad affirmed that man was born with a clean slate and perfect freedom of action. He was, declared the Prophet, the author of his actions, both good and evil, and deserved reward or punishment in accordance with his own decision to shape the course of his actions. Discarding the theory of vicarious Atonement, the Quran established once for all that every man was his own redeemer.

> "And that for man shall be naught,
> Save that wherefor he maketh effort,
> And that his endeavour shall be presently observed."[1]

This was a message of salvation to man which gave him a new confidence in himself and in his ability to chart out his destiny. He applied himself with a renewed vigour, confidence and determination to shape up his own life and brighten the future of humanity.

The Prophet of Islam also declared that sins were but temporary deviations from the right path, inherent in the nature of man, and were brought about by ignorance, mistake and the promptings of the devil or man's own sensual desires. But the innate desire of man was to regret his mistakes and seek pardon of God with a contrite heart. To be broken in spirit by a sense of the guilt and to seek the forgiveness of God showed the goodness of human nature and attracted mercy of the Lord. This gospel of hope and good tidings was a revolutionary message to the

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1. LIII : 39-40

despondent humanity condemned for ever by the guilt of Original Sin and his past misdoings. What a great change it meant in the prevailing atmosphere of gloom and depression of spirits is illustrated by the fact that the Prophet came to be known as 'Apostle of Repentance". Repentance, he said, did not involve faint-heartedness, nor did it arise from fear of disapprobation, but was a bold and a daring step of the first man, Adam, who had thus shown the nobility of his innate nature. The Prophet of Islam endued repentance with the sacredness attached to the acts of devotion to God. He preached the virtues of seeking pardon so forcefully that even the irredeemable sinners, who had lost all hope of forgiveness, resolved to turn away from the sinful ways and to begin a new life of virtue and uprightness, and many of them attained a sublimity of spirit that was envied by others.

Describing the clemency of God which is ever willing to forgive the sinners, the Quran employs a diction so alluringly charming that one wonders whether God loves them more who seek His forgiveness after deviating from the path of virtue. The Quranic verse quoted here shows how forbearing, how long-suffering and how magnanimous God is to the man who cares to turn towards Him for exoneration of the sins. Says the Quran:

> "Say thou: O my bondman who have committed extravagance against themselves, despair not of the mercy of Allah; verily Allah will forgive their sins altogether. Verily He! He is the Forgiving, the Merciful."[1]

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1. XXXIX: 53

Some other verses of the Quran exhorting the believers to acquire positive merits and to win their way to the everlasting Bliss, address them in these words :

"And vie one with another for forgiveness from your Lord, and toward the Garden as wide as are the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who ward off (evil) :

"And those who spend (of that which Allah hath given them) in ease and in adversity, those who control their wrath and are forgiving toward mankind ; Allah loveth the good ;

"And those who, when they do an evil thing or wrong themselves remember Allah and implore forgiveness for their sins—Who forgiveth sins save Allah only ?— and will not knowingly repeat (the wrong) they did.

"The reward of such will be forgiveness from their Lord, and gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever—a bountiful reward for workers !"[1]

Among the characteristics of the true believers, enumerated in another verse, repentance takes precedence of all others.

"They are those who repent, who worship, who praise, who fast constantly, who bow down, who prostrate themselves, who command the reputable and restrain from the disreputable and who keep the ordinances of Allah : and bear thou glad tidings to the believers !"[2]

1. III : 133-36
2. IX : 112

The place of honour accorded to those who repent of their sins is illustrated by the verses of the Quran revealed on the occasion of the forgiveness of three companions[1] of the holy Prophet, who had been excluded from other followers for their failure to accompany the Prophet in the expedition of Tabuk, Before the verse alludes to the mistake of these companions being condoned by God, it mentions the Prophet and the Ansars and Muhajirs in order that no stigma was attached to them after their mistakes had been pardoned. The Quran, in this way, teaches all believers, who take the companions of the Prophet as models of virtue, that no ignominy attaches to a man after a genuine change of heart. The way these verses explain the consequences of blotting out of the sins and elation of the repentant sinners can hardly be found in the scriptures of other religions or treatises on ethics. These verses read :

> "Allah hath turned in mercy to the Prophet, and to the Muhajirin and the Ansar who followed him in the hour of hardship. After the hearts of a party of them had almost swerved aside, then turned He unto them in mercy. Lo ! He is Full of pity, Merciful for them.
>
> "And to the three also (did He turn in mercy) who were left behind, when the earth, vast as it is, was straitened for them, and their own souls were straitened for them till they bethought them that there is no

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1. The companions were Kab ibn Malik, Hilal ibn Ummayya and Mirara ibn Rabi who merely out of lethargy failed to join the expedition. They confessed their weakness openly

refuge from Allah save toward Him. Then turned He unto them in mercy that they (too) might turn (repentant unto Him). Lo ! Allah ! He is the Relenting, the Merciful."[1]

Remission of sin leads us to one of the chief attributes of the Divine Being, that is, His mercy and compassion. The bounty of God's mercy is the constant theme of the Quran. Says God : "My mercy embraceth all things;"[2] while a celestial Tradition of the prophet tells us : "Verily my Mercy overcomes My anger." To despair of the God's mercy was made a cardinal sin. Qouting Jacob and Abraham, two great Prophets of God, the Quran announces : "Verily none despaireth of the comfort of Allah except a people disbelieving"[3] and "who despaireth of the mercy of his Lord save those who are astray ?"[4]

The misery and suffering the human race endured upon earth was, according to the Jewish and Christian doctrines, but a feeble image of the never-ending agony which awaited man in the future world. The monastic orders of the Medieval Ages had taken up this doctrine, which, in itself, was sufficiently revolting, but they had developed it with an appalling vividness and minuteness. The humanity scared by these ghastly visions and glimpses of eternal suffering, was relieved by the Prophets' emphasis on God's all embracing mercy and the efficacy of repentance which could wipe the slate clean of even the

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1. IX : 117-118
2. VII : 156
3. XII : 37
4. XV : 56

most vicious among the castaways of society.

And now we come to yet another gift of the prophethood of Muhammad which is still more far-reaching, more beneficial to the humanity at large. This was the concept of the unity of spirit and matter, the harmony of the sacred and the mundane. He taught that the distinction made between the two was superficial and formal for every action of man, his behaviour and moral, was guided by his motive or mental attitude which, in the terminology of religion, was known as *niyat* or intention. For no religious belief is entirely divorced from the realities of human experience in its manifold practical aspects, the intention or purpose with which any act is done sets the test of its being good or bad. It does not recognise the division between the temporal and ecclesiastical since man's desire to propitiate God and to follow His commands sincerely permeates into every fibre of human activity, no matter whether it is the art of government or war, availing oneself of one's earthly possessions or satisfaction of one's natural desires or earning one's living or leading a married life. With a noble intention every mundane act is turned into a virtuous deed and a means to attaining propinquity to God. On the contrary, no merit whatsoever attaches to acts like devotion to God or fighting in the path of God if the sincere desire to attain the will and pleasure of God were absent

The ancient world had divided life into two compartments, religious and the secular ; and the result was that a wedge had been driven between those who selected one of these as the pursuit of their life. Oftentimes, the two groups were at loggerheads with one another, for, the 'world' and 'religion' were to them incompatible spheres

of human life. Every man had to choose one of the two since nobody could be expected to travel in two boats simultaneously. The prevalent view was that the path of salvation lay not through the rough and tumble of life, but away from the social, economic and political problems of worldly pursuits. No concept of religion which bars the gates to material progress and acquisition of power, riches and fame could be of interest to intelligent, capable and ambitious persons with the result that a great segment of humanity had delivered itself from the rigorous discipline of asceticism which had come to be associated with religion. By withdrawing themselves from the virtuous energies, these men had prevented the great importance of morals from appearing perceptibly in public affairs. The State had revolted against the Church and made itself free from all obligations to it. This hideous schizophrenia not only divested what was called worldly, from the gifts of spiritual beatitude, but also gave birth to the modern faithlessness and agnosticism of Europe which is now threatening to inundate the entire world, if only, because of its political and cultural supremacy. The present wave of crass materialism, loss of faith and moral debasement is but a direct consequence of the division between the spirit and matter invented by the old pagan civilizations.

The Prophet of Mercy, who was sent to the humanity as a warner as well as a messenger of glad tidings, converted the entire life of man into devotion to God by denying the existence of any cleavage between the spiritual and temporal spheres of human affairs. He demolished the wedge between the men of religion and those of the world and commended all of them to unite their efforts for attaining

the pleasure of God and service of humanity. It was because of him that the world could see the ascetics who wore crowns on their heads and the warriors who spent their nights in devotions and prayers.

It would be difficult to conceive of a more complete transformation of life than the one brought about by the fusion of the secular and the sacred, which would require several volumes to be explained in detail. Iqbal has very succinctly versified the significance of this concept in one of his immortal poems.

On monastic order was laid the foundation of
Church,
How could mendicity contain the royalty in its
confines?
The conflict was deep, between hermitry and king-
ship.
One was triumphant, the other subdued.
Politics got rid of religion,
Helpless was the high priest.
When the world and religion parted ways,
Avarice was the ruler, King and Vizier.
Daulism was the doom of mind and matter,
Daulism made the civilization blind.
This is the miracle of the dweller of desert,
Whose warnings reflected the tidings-glad ;
That the humanity's only refuge was this,
That (the mystic) Junaid unites with Ardsher (the
king) !

Yet another radical change brought about by the Prophet of Islam in the life of man was to make him conscious of the ultimate end of his life. Unaware of his goal and

objective, man had his eyes fixed on profane and paltry objects. He directed his whole intelligence and labour to the acquisition of some more wealth or land or fame or power. Virtue having been associated with the pleasurable things, the main object of the vast majority of people was to sublimate their conceptions of happiness and longing with the satisfaction of carnal desires, song and colour, merrymaking, fun and amusement. Revelry of the rich and powerful soon brought up a class of parasites whose whole business was to tickle the fancy of their patrons. But Muhammad told man that the great business of mankind was to exert himself and strive to attain the perfect knowledge of God ; to contemplate on His nature and attributes and lead his wandering soul to divine propinquity through realisation of the Unlimited ; to search out the Unity of the Cause of all causes in the sterling diverse phenomena of nature ; and to seek his pleasure through being kind and just and virtuous. He told man that these were the objectives whose achievement conferred a rank on him envied by the angels of God.

Thus, the prophethood of Muhammad made a clean sweep of the existing order of things in the world. The longing and desire of man was now centered on a new objective: love of God took possession of his being; the pleasure of God became the immortal thirst of human heart and mercy and kindness to God's creatures was recognised as the greatest virtue which became the sole object of his endeavour. It was then, after the advent of Islam that the leading feature of all the countries, Arabia and Iran, Syria and Egypt, Turkistan and Iraq, North Africa and Spain, became the search for higher and tender

virtues, in the pursuit of which we find engaged thousands of love-lorn souls. During this period we find innumerable men of God preaching love of God, kindness and compassion to every sentient being, merits of virtuous living, acquisition of knowledge for attaining the pleasure of God, revulsion to cruelty and indecency and the grace of humility and modesty. They taught the lesson of human dignity and brotherhood of man and made this earth a kingdom of God.

If you peep into the souls of these elevated souls, you would witness the unbelievable flights of their imagination, purity of their innermost feelings and nimbleness of their perceptions. You would see how they were ever willing to put their own life at stake for others, made their own children and family suffer for the good of all and sundry, compelled the autocratic kings and potentiates to do justice to the weak and the poor and how rightfully just they were even to their enemies. Of a fact, it would have been difficult for us to believe today what a fine specimen of humanity, what a sublime soul, were these men of God if the historians and biographers had not preserved a truthful record of their lives and doings.

The striking change in the manners and morals of the people was indeed a miracle worked by the holy Prophet of Islam. Iqbal mentions these gifts of Prophet Muhammad in some of his inimitable verses.

> He slept on a mat of rushes,
> But the crown of Chosroes lay beneath the feet of his followers;
> He chose the nightly solitude of Mount Hira,
> And founded a nation, law and government;

He passed his nights with sleepless eyes,
That his *Millet* might sleep on Chosroes throne ;
In the hour of battle, iron was melted by the flash
of his sword.
At prayer time, tears fell like drops of rain from
his eyes.
In his prayer for Divine help, his 'Amen' was a
sword,
Which extirpated the lineage of kings.
He inaugurated a new Order in the world,
He brought the empires old to an end ;
In his sight the high and the low were one,
He sat with the slave at table one ;
He burnt clear the distinctions of birth and clan.
His fire consumed all this trash and bran.

Another poet, Hali, has summed it up in a verse wherein he says ;

Springtide that now overfills the world,
Is the outgrowth of saplings planted by him.

Verily, God saith in truth : "We have sent thee not save as a mercy for the peoples."

Speach of Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi delivered in connexion with the Birthday Anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad at Lucknow on 2nd May, 1975. English rendering by Mohiuddin Ahmad.

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